

Avery County Economic Development Committee
May 31, 2022

Minutes

The Avery County Economic Development Committee (EDC) met at 5:00 p.m. May 31, 2022. The meeting was held at the Avery County Administrative Building, located at 175 Linville Street, Newland, NC 28657

Present for the meeting were: Ken Walter, Susan Siirila, Clayton Harpold, Edward Dean, Dennis Aldridge, Avery County Commissioner, Anne Winkleman, Jerry Moody, Terri Melton, Dave Smith and McNeil Johnston, Avery Journal Newspaper intern

Members absent: Kate Gavenus and Phillip Barrier, Avery County Manager

Ken Walter called the meeting to order at 5:02 p.m.

1. Approve and/or amend the April 26, 2022 minutes

Dave Smith made a motion to accept the minutes as presented. Edward Dean seconded the motion. No discussion occurred. The motion was approved unanimously.

2. Unfinished Business

A. Ken Walter status update re: our June 9th "Finding, Keeping and Motivating Workers Workshop"

Ken Walter reported that a total of 26 individuals were signed up to attend the workshop. He stated that Dawn Carpenter will share the list of individuals with Susan Siirila, who may be able to invite others to attend. Mr. Walter will meet with Arizona at the Avery County Cooperative Extension office on Tuesday to do final planning. Round tables will be used at the workshop. Jerry Moody advised that there are three screens in the room where the workshop will be held which can be used to broadcast while the event is in progress, or while the speaker is at the podium. The workshop will begin at 11:30 a.m. with lunch to follow the presentation by Tonya Snider. Ms. Snider will be available during the lunch period for questions or interactions with attendees at the workshop. Mr. Walter thanked the Avery Journal newspaper and the Avery County Chamber of Commerce for helping to advertise the workshop.

B. Kate Gavenus to report on New Business Guide Tool Box project and survey. In Ms. Gavenus' absence, Mr. Walter reported that work on this project will continue after the budget for next year is approved. Mr. Aldridge stated that the budget will be approved at the County Commissioners' July meeting. He added that the ad valorem tax rate is .40 cents, down from .55 cents following the reevaluation. The actual tax revenue objective for the next year is less than last year.

C. Phillip Barrier to report on the Occupancy Tax status and county budget progress. In Mr. Barrier's absence, Mr. Aldridge reported that we had received a report from the NC General Assembly that the occupancy tax bill did make it to the floor in this

session and is ready for declaration. This is tentative, but Mr. Aldridge indicated that in his experience, there is no reason that the bill would not be approved, as there are other municipalities and counties that are also listed with Avery County on the same matter. It does have to be presented as a bill, or an act of the legislature. Also, the distribution percentage will need to be considered. The occupancy tax monies come to a municipality or county with a strict designation of percentages showing how the funds can be spent. Once the occupancy tax is in place, it does not have to be approved by the county commissioners. There will be directives for usage, but other approval will not be required.

Mr. Aldridge reported that Avery County also expects to receive funding from an opioid settlement. The criteria requires that all 100 counties in North Carolina approve the plan. There are 4 or 5 counties that have not signed off on the settlement plan at this point, and it is an 'all or nothing' situation. Once this is finalized, the settlement will be paid out over 14 years. The larger counties may receive more funding than Avery County will, but it will still be funding that we may count on over a period of 14 years. This money may be used to fund some of the drug rehab programs or re-entry programs, etc.

Additionally, Mr. Aldridge reported that with American Recovery Plan funds, Avery County has received 3.4 million dollars. The bulk of that will be used for broadband connectivity. Requests for proposals have gone to different companies, to secure plans for how we can use the funding to serve areas that are currently unserved. We have two respondents, Skyline/Skybest and Spectrum.

Mr. Aldridge stated that he will travel to Raleigh with other High-Country Council of Governments representatives for the COG legislative days. They will lobby on issues for the seven counties served by the HCCOG. Mr. Aldridge plans to speak specifically for Avery County as well. Cindy Turbyfill, clerk, noted that Mr. Aldridge had basically covered all topics in Mr. Barrier's absence. She completed the report by adding that she had received three EDC applications from Susan Siirila and Kate Gavenus (current members whose terms will expire) and Ellis Ayers. The deadline for applications is May 31, 2022.

3. Pending Unfinished Business

A. Avery County High School & Cannon Hospital videos to be scheduled in or after July – included in our 2022-2023 budget at \$1,000.00 each.

B. Avery County ad in the Avery County Chamber of Commerce "Business & Tourism Guide" for 2023 to be increased to a full-page ad, per our 2022-2023 budget allocation.

C. Other

4. New Business and/or other issues to address

A. Ken Walter reviewed an email he had sent to Avery County Schools superintendent Dan Brigman regarding possible EDC candidates from the educational field. "It has been a number of years since we have had a member of our Avery County

School System as an Avery County Economic Development Committee member. A seat on this committee is now open and I am hoping that I might entice you to consider recruiting a member of your staff who would be interested in joining our committee. You would be our obvious first choice, but knowing how busy you are I feel it unfair to even ask. Mr. Walter stated that he received an immediate response recommending Ellis Ayers, Director of Secondary Education & CTE, who would be willing to serve if appointed.

B. Phillip Barrier, Dennis Aldridge, Woody Young and Ken Walter attended a “Tourism Development Authorities and Occupancy Tax” forum hosted by Kate Gavenus on May 3. The presenter was Chris Cavanaugh, President of the Magellan Group and an acknowledged authority on all aspects of Occupancy Tax application and TDA administration. His fee to do a presentation for us and the Board of Commissioners would be \$175.00/hour plus expenses (mostly mileage). This might be a good use of occupancy tax funds for educating us all. Dennis Aldridge agreed that proper administration of occupancy tax funds is very important and that we should look at all information that might be helpful.

C. Dave Smith re: any new Avery County commercial real estate news
Mr. Smith said that several projects are in the works, but nothing to report at this time.

D. What can the combined efforts of Avery County government & EDC do to attract a developer to build a combination of affordable residential & apartment buildings? Ken Walter reported that he had invited Dan Williams (real estate developer) to the meeting, but that due to his colleagues having Covid, he felt it better not to come to the meeting. He may attend the June meeting. Discussion occurred regarding housing needs, rising rental costs, fuel costs and other factors related to affordable housing and Avery County’s current issues. Housing trends in metropolitan areas was also discussed.

E. Other

No other reports.

5. Avery County Chamber of Commerce – Anne Winkleman

Ms. Winkleman reported that many people on the tourism boards that she is on say that people are going back on cruises that were cancelled due to covid. This will impact some of our tourism. She stated that Summer Fest is coming soon, and that it will hopefully be a success. There will be music, inflatables for children and several vendors including food vendors. The festival will be held at Heritage Park in Newland. Ms. Winkleman reported that the Chamber of Commerce currently has 453 active members, with eight new members. The website has had 6,070 recent hits. The top pages that were hit were: The Avery Business Guide, The Fine Arts Festival and the Event Calendar. The top references were: Wooly Worm, Visit NC and Ski Sugar. Facebook reached about 3,300, Instagram reached 1,300 and the chamber sent information out to about 2,000 recipients via Constant Contact. Ms. Winkleman shared other information about events and attractions that will be available at the upcoming festivals, such as Merriweather, Sweetie Bear (Sugar Mtn.) and Millie the Bear (Grandfather Mtn.) Ms. Winkleman concluded with sharing that her office is moving to

another location. It will be in the same building, located at Tynecastle, but in the location where Rustic Rooster used to be. They are currently updating the office.

6. Agricultural sub-Committee Report – Jerry Moody

A. News and/or updated information on the kill & chill project news

No report.

B. Farm Land conservancy progress update

Mr. Moody reported that work continues on the conservancy project. Mr. Moody is working on getting attorneys lined up to talk with farmers about turning their land into farming conservation areas. He reported that he is not getting much feedback at this point. He reported that Avery County is down to about 200-250 tree growers, who are growing between 4,000 – 5,000 acres of trees. Last year, the income was \$46 million because of the increase on the price of trees. Mr. Moody does not foresee that changing. Many tree growers have expressed that they do not want to sell their land. The land conservancy program would allow farmers to keep possession of their land, and begin working with a youth or younger worker, who might eventually see some income from their work and realize that farming might be a good vocation for them. Mr. Moody will work with representatives of Avery County Schools to learn if there are ways to match youth workers with growers. Youth workers who may link up with tree growers may diversify and move into areas such as livestock production or production of other crops. Mr. Moody will continue working on this as a pilot project and hopefully secure assistance or funding from the state to continue. Mr. Walter asked if farmers who might get involved with such a project would be allowed to lease their property. Mr. Moody said he would hope that would be the case. Mr. Aldridge pointed out that agriculture may be the only thing that would keep unbridled development at bay.

C. Other

No other information.

7. Marketing sub-Committee Report – Ken Walter

A. We hear from multiple sources that quality of life and “What do you have to offer?” are the current website “hot topics” – our website then is right on the money. Ken Walter stated that we are good with data from employers which is now shown on our website. Phillip Barrier and Ken Walter continue to work with the Business Advisory Council, which is also part of Ellis Ayers’ program with apprenticeships.

The next meeting will be on Tuesday, June 28, 2022.

Ken Walter adjourned the meeting at 6:07 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Susan P. Siirila